Video Content Delivery for the ESL Classroom with Vodcasting Technology

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will explain the means by which video content can be delivered to the ESL classroom via a technology known as vodcasting. The ability to deliver video to the ESL classroom CAN profoundly change the learning process, and I will explore the implications of this new technology in this paper. It must be emphasized, however, that the ABILITY to deliver video does not NECESSARILY enhance the learning experience. Content material needs to be appropriate and delivered in a manner that leads toward mastery of required language skills. To meet that goal, I will explain how material can be organized into "knowledge units", as defined by B.F. Skinner in his work on programmed learning techniques. Using these knowledge units we will progress beyond the linguistic competence emphasized in traditional classrooms and work toward achieving true communicative competence.

The American psychologist B.F. Skinner believed people are best able to learn when the cognitive domain, or target material, is divided into knowledge units he called "learning frames". He defined a learning frame as a limited set of new facts coupled with an incomplete statement or question the learner was required to complete based on information provided from within the frame itself, or from previous frames. Skinner's "programmed learning" approach required that frames be ordered so that knowledge units required for subsequent frames were mastered before they were needed. Learning was made possible through a series of very small and rigidly ordered steps directed toward mastery of a series of learning frames and the inferences that could be associated with the facts contained within those learning frames. The step-by-step approach advocated by Skinner provided reinforcement for correct responses, and kept the student focused on the material being studied.

Skinner was especially critical of traditional education's inability to provide sufficient reinforcement for the material being studied. "Perhaps," said Skinner, "the most serious criticism of the current classroom is the relative infrequency of reinforcement."(Skinner, 1962, page 25) Skinner believed reinforcement was crucial to the learning process because it was only through repetition and reinforcement that a behavior, or acquired skill, could be maintained in strength. Skills not used frequently were easily lost, as language teachers and students can attest to.

The concept of programmed learning based on learning frames and the sequential mastery of material became extremely influential in textbook development in the 1960s, even

though the practice of computerized programmed learning itself was limited by access to the rather expensive computers of the time. Ironically, interest in programmed learning techniques seemed to have waned just as the development of personal computers made it truly possible to implement the practices Skinner had advocated.

I believe this was unfortunate, as skillful repetition of materials, with positive reinforcement, remains a critical part of the learning process, and particularly so in second language acquisition. The programmed learning movement may have been the victim of new educational philosophies in vogue at the time emphasizing critical thinking and denigrating rote learning. While I am certainly not questioning the importance of critical thinking, I believe it may be time to reconsider Skinner's theories and their application in the field of ESL, with a special consideration for their use in developing video materials for use in the classroom.

Although the learning frames in video may be larger than the units common to the programmed learning texts that first utilized Skinner's ideas, the plot and story development of most movies and video material essentially follows the pattern of learning associated with Skinner's ideas. Movies and other video materials basically present a series of sequentially ordered facts asking for deductions that lead to an understanding of the next series of events presented in the video. However, due to the complexity of the medium we may be confronted with quite a large number of facts to be absorbed in relatively small frames. For example, in movies plot development will usually work in tandem with character development, requiring that we process information about the characters at the same time we are attempting to understand the story that is developing. This is rather different from the one fact, one deduction model common to most programmed learning texts.

Moreover, movies and video material have not traditionally allowed us to backtrack to find errors in our reasoning skills in the event of a "wrong answer", or incorrect interpretation of the events unfolding. A failure to understand the character or plot development at a particular point in the movie may merely result in our becoming lost in the story, with the prospect that we will not be able to, or desire to, watch the movie to its completion and thereby emerge with an understanding of the idea the movie was attempting to teach or convey. What is missing from the traditional movie format is the ability to branch, and especially to branch backward.

Fortunately, technology has given us the ability to correct this situation. Branching becomes easy to achieve when video material is "chunked", in the same way that reading units are "chunked" to make it easier to understand written text. This of course means that movies need to be broken down into "learning frames" that present a limited amount of information, rather than presented unedited in their entirety.

It is the digitalization of the video material that makes all of this possible. With digitalization the instructor is able to reshape the video material to suit the needs of the students. There is no longer any need to watch the video material in the sequence dictated by the creator of that material, nor is there a need to view the material according to the "chunk" sizes devised for the native speaker. The teacher is able to break the video into pieces more easily understood by a second language learner, reorder sequences when necessary, and even provide online help for difficult material. In short, the teacher is able to take material that originally contained nothing more than entertainment value, and through skillful editing and application turn it into material that is eminently suited for the classroom.

If this sounds difficult, I would like to assure you it is not, and I will speak more about how it can be done presently. If the procedure sounds time-consuming, however, I can assure you that it is, just as it is always time-consuming to create teaching materials. Yet, with sufficient time resources and creativity we will be able to create materials that not only hold student interest, but also succeed in providing the reinforcement and sequential learning Skinner advocated.

Unfortunately, there is still a considerable bias against the use of video in the language classroom. Much of the bias is based on an incorrect understanding of how video should properly be used in the classroom. There is little educational value in merely taking a Hollywood-produced movie, or BBC production, and showing it to students with no modification. We would never think of presenting ESL students with a copy of "Hamlet" and asking them to read it in its entirety, with no explanation, and then justifying our action as a reading exercise. Yet, some teachers will do essentially that when presenting video material, sometimes with the addition of subtitles to make the material actually comprehensible. We can not legitimately be claiming to teach the target language with such a strategy, though we might be able to insist we are instilling cultural competency through this rather lazy approach to teaching.

If we are to use video successfully, and truly teach the target language with video, we must learn how to break the video material into the "learning frames" Skinner was so fond of. Unfortunately, there are at present no "graded video units" in the way there are "graded word lists" for reading, so it will be necessary for the teacher to prepare his or her own material. Since much commercially available video material is under copyright, it would be best to develop our own video content as soon as possible. In the meantime, however, assuming the video will not be used commercially, and will only be used for instruction within our own classrooms, we should be able to use "fair use" laws so as to make it possible to apply commercially available content for instructional purposes.

How, though, are we going to deliver this content to our students, to make it possible for them to realize the benefits of our efforts? Fortunately, technology in the form of vodcasting now makes it possible to easily post video on the web, and tie it together in

ways to facilitate the learning process. In the remainder of this paper I will describe just how trivial this process really is, and assure you that everyone is now capable of using and promoting these techniques in classrooms.

In order to make all of this possible, of course, one must first have access to a computer-based video server to which the video material may be posted. I strongly recommend that the instructor set up his or her own server in order to gain more control over the presentation of material as soon as that becomes possible. However, initially the instructor may wish to work with offsite servers such as Podbean or Video Egg to post the video material. These sites make it possible for even novices to easily post video material in a location viewable by students with Internet access. Posting the video here, rather than on one's own website, will mean that it will not be easy for most instructors to tie the material together into the sequential "learning frames" envisioned by Skinner, but it will give the students access to materials, and the ability to repeatedly review those materials. By setting up a web page that points to the location of the video material the instructor can achieve the sequential teaching and learning Skinner advocated, but that will require an ability to produce one's own web pages. This is something that is no longer difficult, but some teachers may yet find it somewhat intimidating.

A far easier and more effective method for posting video on the internet involves something known as vodcasting. "Vodcasting" is simply an adaptation of the term "podcasting", which refers to posting audio online. Vodcasting is also known as "Vlogging", which combines video with blogging. Podcasting and Vlogging have become commonplace on the Internet, and the posting process is so easy, that thousands of people now routinely create their own podcasts.

Software for creating and posting vodcasts is available for all major computer platforms, including Macintosh, Linux and UNIX, and MS Windows. One popular program known as WebPod Studio makes vodcasting on a Windows machine easy enough for even teachers and adult users. The process is as follows:

1. Click on the "Video" button on the toolbar.
2. Select the camera and format from the hardware list.
3. Select a filename for the video file.
4. Start recording the video by clicking on the "Start" recording button.
5. When finished, click on the "Stop" recording button.
6. You will now be instructed to "Finalize" the video. Click on the button labeled "Create Podcast".
7. Answer "Yes" to the query "Will this be a podcast for the iPod video?
8. Click on "Finish" to compile and encode the data.

When finished encoding, you will be asked if you want to publish the video to your server. After providing some information about your server the video files will be posted and become ready for viewing. The process is really incredibly easy, and provides teachers with

a means to create interesting and useful video material for classroom use. It is, though, how the material is tied together, and how it is broken into chunks, that will ultimately decide how useful the material actually is to the second language learner. We have fortunately reached a point in time where the technology enabling our teaching methods is actually easy to use, but we are yet faced with difficult decisions about how the teaching material can best be adapted for use by our students. The outcome of these decisions will necessarily differ from one teacher to the next, in accordance with the needs, abilities, and backgrounds of the students being taught.

However, some basic generalizations can be made. In the field of reading instruction, a number of researchers have noted that chunks most naturally correspond to prosodic patterns of native speakers. Sentences are normally chunked with one strong point of stress per chunk. A chunk thus typically consists of a single context word surrounded by various function words. In most cases, a simple, context-free grammar is capable of describing the content of the chunk.

The chunking of video will normally follow the same pattern, though we must also be cognizant of the fact that the material will be processed on both the level of auditory and visual input. Video chunks with significant visual context may actually tend to be larger than reading chunks, while portions of the video with no contributing visual context – i.e., only an auditory context – may tend to be somewhat smaller than reading chunks. In many instances where there is an absence of video cues, it may be desirable to merely chunk vocabulary words, and provide students with explanations of the words in text format.

This is where vodcasting excels. The vodcast not only gives the instructor the ability to present video, it also provides the ability to comment on the video. Skillfully presented comments can lead students through a complicated video segment, enabling them to arrive at the end of video with a strong understanding of the material presented.

It is at this level that we are able to develop the true communicative competence we seek to provide through our instruction. Not only will we be able to develop the linguistic competence the students require, we will also be able to focus on the sociolinguistic and cultural competences that often evade students. Skillful annotation of the video material by the instructor will give students a new depth of understanding that is often not possible through mere conversation practice.

This is because vodcasting allows for independent learning, and thus is capable of providing the repetition and reinforcement Skinner identified as being so important for attaining strength in the cognitive domain the teacher has chosen to focus on. In second language learning, the ability to review pronunciation and usage models, and experiment with discourse competence, is especially important, and provides another reason why vodcasting can be such a useful tool for ESL students.

Vodcasting allows the teacher to tie material together in an efficient way that saves valuable study time. Skillful editing of the video means we are no longer forced to watch the video in its entirety, or in the sequence it was originally created. I will provide an example of this when I demonstrate a vodcast explaining the various ways in which pigs have contributed to the English language. By eliminating extraneous and overly difficult material, I can match the video to the abilities of my students. What was once mere entertainment has now become efficient and effective material for teaching a second language.

Vodcasting is thus an easy-to-use and highly effective tool for ESL teaching. It allows for the creation of material that captures the attention of students, and is capable of providing the step-by-step learning Skinner promoted in his ideas about learning frames and programmed learning. Low-cost personal computers and Internet access have finally made the dream of computerized programmed learning a real possibility, and it now only remains for instructors to turn that dream into reality.

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